

**The Energy And Technology Committee**

**February 26, 2008**

**House Bill No. 5328, AAC UTILITY CUSTOMER SERVICE  
COMPLAINTS**

**Testimony of**

**The Office of Consumer Counsel**

**Mary J. Healey, Consumer Counsel**

The Office of Consumer Counsel (OCC) has carefully reviewed and supports House Bill No. 5328, AAC UTILITY CUSTOMER SERVICE COMPLAINTS, which seeks to charge the Office of Consumer Counsel with addressing utility customer service complaints.

It must be stressed, however, that while the OCC stands ready to assume the role contemplated by H.B. No. 5328, there remain serious budget, personnel, and legal questions that absolutely must be answered before a transfer of this magnitude may occur. We accordingly look forward to working with this subcommittee and other members of the General Assembly to finalize this bill to develop a process that will best address the clear problems that are present in the current handling of utility customer service complaints.

This bill specifically relates to services or bills rendered by any public service companies, private water companies, electric suppliers, or cellular mobile telephone carriers or a resellers of service provided by a cellular mobile telephone carrier.

While the OCC is of course supportive of an expanded focus on utility consumer issues, particularly in light of recent well-publicized incidents involving consumer complaints going unanswered, there are a number of substantial concerns pertaining to the appropriate resources necessary to perform the new role in a thorough and appropriate manner.

As the OCC has already testified to the Regulation and Protection Subcommittee of the Appropriations Committee, the budget revision to the OCC would be on the order of a 50% increase (e.g., \$1.5 million) to include personnel costs, housing for the unit (currently scattered across the DPUC's facility), and additional supervisory costs. Presumably, this funding would be a transfer from the DPUC's budget to the OCC.

The proposed bill does not presently provide detailed information on the proposed functions to be transferred to it from the DPUC,

including staffing complement (e.g., the DPUC currently has 15 customer service representatives, with the supervisory position unfilled), and funding of Other Expenses in order to thoroughly respond to the new initiatives contained in H.B. No. 5328.

As currently configured within the DPUC, this unit handled nearly 7,000 customer inquiries, including over 3,000 complaints in 2006, as well as handling customer service, enforcing utility company rules and regulations, and service quality issues in proceedings before the DPUC.

On the legal front, it is vital to note that the OCC's statutory mandate directs it to "advocate" on behalf of consumers, not to "mediate" or "arbitrate" in situations in which a public service company may be in the right (thus placing the OCC in the currently-untenable position of arguing against consumers). Similarly, without extensive revisions to C.G.S. Title 16, the OCC will be in the position of merely negotiating between public service companies and consumers with the ultimate disposition of the matter, either by acceptance of a settlement or prosecuting a public service company, remaining within the statutory authority of the DPUC.

As noted above, the OCC stands ready to assume the role contemplated by H.B. No. 5328, but there remain serious budget, personnel, and legal questions that must be answered before a transfer of this magnitude may occur. We look forward to working with this subcommittee and other members of the General Assembly to finalize this process.